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ABSTRACT

Rural school districts must cope with problems of finance, energy, teacher recruitment, and curriculum. The Pawnee Heights School District (Kansas) has dealt with all of these. Concerning finance, Pawnee Heights has taken advantage of several federal programs including CETA, Title I, Career Education, and Title III; it has filed an application for Title II-B Funds. The district also invests its money in a capital outlay program. To cut energy costs, in 1980 Pawnee Heights spent 21% less on electricity than in 1979. The district participates in the Title III Energy Program; it has recently received a Technical Assistance Grant. The district tries to recruit young teachers with little or no experience, but whom they feel will be good teachers. To insure a good curriculum, there must be administrative leadership, Board of Education involvement, and staff participation. Pawnee Heights sets up yearly individual meetings with teachers to discuss additions, deletions, and recommendations to the curriculum. Pawnee Heights has also used cooperative education and vocational education programs. To meet the needs of rural students, small school districts should emphasize basic skills, encourage teachers to have broader subject background and certification, involve parents and community in education, be creative, and work cooperatively. (CM)

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Pursuits, Problems, and Pleasures of Rural Education

Larry Thomas
Rozel, Kansas

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Pawnee Heights School District

School District includes: High School located in Rozel - (9-12) Student enrollment of 68. Grade School located in Burdett - (K-8) 112 students. District population approximately 800.

General Fund Budget - $693,240
Budget Per Pupil - $4,054
Assessed Valuation - $14,041,205
Mill Levy - 42.83

There are many problems facing rural school districts. I will discuss what is considered four of the more important problems. They include: Financial, Energy, Teacher Recruitment, and Curriculum.

# #

Financial

At a recent American Association of School Administrators Convention it was pointed out that 32% of the nations students are in non-metropolitan areas - but they receive only 5% of the federal research dollars, 11% of the Library & Material Funds and 13% of the Vocational Funds. Keeping these figures in mind - it is easy to see why rural school budgets are tight and why schools are forming cooperatives to try and build better vocational and curricular programs.

Our school district has taken advantage of several federal programs including CETA, Title I, Career Education, Title III, and just recently filed an application for Title II-B Funds. All of the money from the federal government has helped our curriculum program considerably.

It is also wise in the small school district to take advantage of the numerous types of economic investments. Check the state codes as to the kind of investments school districts are able to get involved with and then

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Paper presented at the Second Annual Kansas State University Rural and Small School Conference, November 9-11, 1980, Manhattan, Kansas.

put your tax collection and other monies that might be able to work for as long as possible for the various revenues possible. We have a CD program in our district and FY 1980 collected $57,508.39 that was deposited in our capital outlay program. This FY we will again deposit most of our money in the capital outlay fund - but may insert some of the interest in our food service fund to help cut back the huge transfer we have to make each year to food service.

Finance continues to be a big problem in rural education. If something is not done within the next 3-5 years financially with regard to support of education, then by the end of the 80's the public schools may take a different look altogether. The concept of support of public schools by the property tax, which is the most popular method used in most states, has to be reviewed and possibly revised.

The cost of education even though we face dwindling enrollments is increasing faster than the enrollments are declining. The area other than energy where costs are going up, which affects us the most, is salaries of all personnel.

Energy

Energy is a big problem facing the rural educator. Many rural districts are already looking at budget cutbacks because of rising energy costs - and their districts will be faced with even bigger problems in this area in the near future. Most of the slow starts in energy conservation has come in very small districts - under 300, which Pawnee Heights would be in this category.

Not so in our school system though - our district spent in FY 1980 21% less on electricity than it did in FY 1979. This is an even more outstanding figure since everyone knows how electricity rates rise. The savings in kilowatt hours was much greater than that, but I prefer to deal with dollar savings. Our school district has been participating in the Title III Energy

Program. We recently received a Technical Assistance Grant for $3,075 for our High School and Elementary School. Our district eventually plans on carrying out a project that will over the long haul save our district even more money.

Four things a district must do to aid in the conservation of energy:

1. A commitment by Board of Education and School Personnel to energy conservation.
2. Conduct an energy audit.
3. Inspect equipment and facilities (TA report)
4. Evaluate and Promote

It is estimated for every dollar budgeted for energy in 1979 - school will need six dollars in 1989.

Recruitment of Teachers

There is definitely a teacher shortage for rural schools. This is primarily due to an image that rural schools are "Inferior" and low salaries. Another problem in this area rests with colleges and universities as they seem to direct the training program at urban, not rural schools. A recent survey conducted reported that only six higher education institutions in the United States have programs specifically for training students to teach in rural areas.

The problem of sending student teachers to rural schools is a problem that does exist in Kansas. I do feel like this may be changed in the near future, and one college in Kansas has just recently taken steps in that area.

Teachers in rural districts are sometimes required to teach in areas for which they have not been specifically trained, or to teach too many people at once. With the increase in mandated programs over the past few years the capacity of some small school staffs are being stretched to the limits.

The public will have to realize to get quality teachers in these rural schools they will need to continue increasing salaries to be competitive with industry and business. If not - rural schools will face a tremendous teacher shortage from the teacher surplus that we faced in the early and middle 1970's.

There are already shortages in some of the specialty areas like science, math, special education and vocation education. It is even more marked when you look at the Education Departments' involvement at universities that prepare teachers and see the fewer numbers of students who are graduating with teaching degrees now compared to the number in the early and middle 1970's.

The problem is compounded further that those who are graduating with teaching degrees are not going into teaching, especially in the specialized areas. The reason for this is that graduates can make as much as 50-100% more in starting salary in industry as compared to teaching.

Our philosophy at Pawnee Heights is to recruit the best teachers possible. We try to recruit young teachers with little or no experience who we feel will be very good teachers, realizing these people may only be with us for two or three years.

Curriculum

A manuscript entitled "Schooling in Isolated Communities" talks about school curriculum for small school districts. This paper indicates there should be:

1. a strong foundation in teaching the basic skills and essential facts
2. an emphasis on practical skills
3. training and self-directed study in the development of initiative
4. a focus on the community
5. an orientation to familiarize students with the outside world
6. attention to future of students

The challenges being created for those of us who administer small school districts is to provide curricular offerings that meet the changing needs and social demands for young people. The opportunity exists in rural education for more individualized education.

To insure that rural students are taught the proper curriculum - the following needs to take place:

1. Administrative Leadership - probably the most important is the role played by the administration. They must provide direction for the board and staff as well as active participation if improvements are to be made.

2. Board Involvement - the Board of Education must be vitally concerned and interested in providing quality education for students if curriculum improvements are to be made. The board must establish the education goals of the district.

3. Staff participation - for curriculum improvement to occur, teachers must become involved in the decision-making process.

Although very small at Pawnee Heights we constantly set up committees that involve our district curriculum. Once a year I set up individual meetings with teachers to discuss the schedule, possible additions, deletions or recommendations to our curriculum. We believe their expertise is quite important in our district.

Resource outside the district - for school districts to effectively improve curriculum such resources are absolutely essential.

Citizen as a resource - Advisory Committees are an excellent means of learning about how people feel about the school curriculum.

Neighboring schools as a resource - Neighboring school districts may offer programs you don't and have room for several of your students.

It would be very hard for rural districts to exist without cooperative for special education. Vocation program cooperatives have also been used in our school district.

Inservice Activities -

When the staff, community and board have decided the direction for curricular improvement an inservice plan should be established.

Curriculum involvement will only occur by design, planning, and hard work.

Summary

What about the future for rural education? It would have been hard to predict some of the things that happened in the 1970's and the effect on rural schools.

1. The increase in education for the handicapped.
2. The push for equality for women in schools.
3. The due process movement for students.
4. The back to basics movement.
5. Increase in career education.
6. The declining enrollment.
7. The accountability of education.
8. The increase of teacher power through collective bargaining and policical action.

Small school districts in the future must attack problems head on. We will have to take steps to deal with the changes of the community. We have to do this by emphasizing basic skills, especially those contained in reading, writing and math.

Administrators and board members must work together to see that teachers stretch their certificates and educational background to cover subject matter. Small schools should involve parents and community members. School districts must work cooperatively to meet the needs of students. Small districts must be creative. People are reluctant to try new ideas, because they have never been done before.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Research Report, rural education lags behind city and suburban education in virtually all areas. Rural education has less support staff. Rural students are more likely to enroll in school later and complete fewer years of school than urban students. Rural students score lower on national tests and fail to attend college as frequently as city students. However statistics show that people living in rural communities and small towns are the most satisfied with the schools.

I believe there are many advantages to our rural schools. Among them are:

1. According to the latest Gallup Poll of the publics attitude toward public schools - lack of discipline and use of drugs is listed as the two big problems. These problems exist in rural schools - but not the magnitude that exists in larger districts.
2. Rural schools do not have the animosity between teachers and the board of education that bigger districts normally do.
3. School and community spirit and pride is more noticeable in rural schools.
4. Parents, teachers, and students have a greater satisfaction with the school.
5. School attendance is much better in rural schools.
6. The dropout rate is much lower.
7. More individualized curriculum.
8. Vandalism is lower.

What can we do as administrators, teachers, and school board members to improve our schools? Some of the more important are:

1. Sell the schools and programs to the community.
2. Promote innovative ideas.
3. Get involved with education for the community.
4. In-service activities for school personnel.
5. Attend meetings and workshops that are of vital interest.
6. Examine other school districts in the area.
7. Challenge school personnel.

Mr. Larry Thomas received his B.S. and M.S. at Kansas State College at Pittsburg. He is currently the superintendent of Pawnee Heights USD #496.